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The relationship between maternal childhood emotional abuse/neglect and parenting outcomes: A Systematic Review.

Abstract

This paper reviews the evidence concerning the association between reported maternal childhood experience of emotional abuse and/or neglect and subsequent parenting outcomes. Relevant studies were identified through a systematic search of four electronic databases using a pre-determined keyword search. Reference lists of included papers were reviewed and key authors in the field contacted to ascertain whether other papers were available. Twelve studies which met our eligibility criteria were included for review. Tentative support was found for a relationship between maternal childhood emotionally abusive/neglectful experiences and a range of adverse parenting outcomes, including increased parenting stress and maltreatment potential, lower empathy and greater psychological control. However, limitations within the research (e.g. small sample sizes, retrospective designs) reduce the confidence with which we can draw firm conclusions. Recommendations are offered for future research together with an outline of clinical implications arising from this review.

Key Practitioner messages:

- There is tentative evidence that maternal childhood experience of emotional abuse/neglect may be associated with subsequent deficits in parenting.
- Maternal childhood experiences of being parented should be considered when attempting to make sense of children's difficulties and/or problems in the parent-child relationship.

- Further research is required to explore these relationships and to build on our knowledge about contextual risk and protective factors.

Key words: Emotional abuse, Emotional neglect, Parenting, Systematic Review.

Introduction

Abusive and neglectful childhood experiences have been demonstrated to impact negatively at both the individual level, in terms of psychological, health and behavioural outcomes, and the interpersonal level, through impairment in relationships (Bailey *et al.* 2012). Within this context, the impact on survivors' subsequent parenting behaviours has received considerable attention due to the propensity for negative outcomes to impact on future generations. There is a general consensus that child maltreatment, particularly physical and sexual abuse, may lead to an increased risk of the intergenerational transmission of negative or abusive parenting behaviours (e.g. Valentino *et al.*, 2012).

The impact of exposure to childhood emotional abuse and neglect

The focus on outcomes of abusive and neglectful behaviours has, in recent years, widened to incorporate experiences of psychological maltreatment. Emotional abuse and emotional neglect can be experienced independently, but also commonly co-occur with each other and other forms of maltreatment (Claussen and Crittenden, 1991).

Indeed, there is growing recognition that this form of maltreatment can be understood to underpin all others (Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan, 2009; Hart and Glaser, 2011). For this reason, they could be the most common form of maltreatment experienced by

children (Trickett *et al.*, 2009) High prevalence rates of emotional abuse and neglect are concerning given the known associations between this type of maltreatment and deleterious consequences such as compromised emotional well-being and development, impaired academic performance, behavioural disturbance and poor relational functioning (Iwaniec *et al.*, 2006). Some research has identified that it is the psychological component of abusive and neglectful behaviours which may have the most detrimental consequences on subsequent functioning (e.g. Kent *et al.*, 1999). ().

Defining and recognising emotional abuse and neglect

Accumulating evidence highlighting both the impact and frequency of these forms of maltreatment has led to an increased drive to promote clarity around definitions of emotional abuse and neglect. Historically, detection of, and intervention with, these forms of maltreatment have been hampered by difficulties in defining the concepts and establishing the thresholds for emotionally abusive/neglectful behaviours (Glaser, 2002; Wright, 2007). Emotional abuse and neglect can be defined broadly as “persistent, non-physical, harmful interactions with the child by the caregiver, which include both omission and commission” (Glaser, 2011: p. 869). The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1995) uses a list of parental behaviours (e.g. spurning, terrorising) under which emotionally abusive parenting behaviours can be categorised. Glaser (2002) highlighted a number of limitations to this approach, the most important of which is the lack of a theoretical basis to this list. She proposed a theoretically driven conceptual framework, based on the elements that comprise a child’s psychosocial being. This is of particular importance given the insights that attachment theory and social learning models have provided regarding the potential

impacts of childhood exposure to emotional abuse and neglect. Glaser's framework describes five different situations in which a child's emotional needs may be unattended or compromised thus allowing many more harmful parental behaviours to be described under each category than the APSAC model. Cichetti and Toth (2005) emphasised the fundamental association between the early child and caregiver relationship, the quality of the attachment bond and the subsequent internalisation of relational experiences in the formation of internal working models. Early experiences which are emotionally abusive or neglectful are understood to lead to negative internal representations of the self and others (Riggs, 2010). These may then confer a negative impact on the quality and nature of interpersonal relationships and experiences, including future parenting.

We may hypothesise, therefore, that mothers who were exposed to early relationships that were hostile, denigrating, inconsistent, or which failed to acknowledge and celebrate their individuality, may demonstrate deficits in multiple aspects of their own parenting.

Objective of review

This paper aims to contribute to both the child maltreatment and parenting literatures by reviewing the relationship between mothers' emotionally abusive and emotionally neglectful experiences in childhood and subsequent parenting ('parenting outcomes').

Method

Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

This systematic review included both retrospective and prospective cohort, cross-sectional and case-control studies which met the following inclusion criteria: (1) the

study explored the intergenerational relationship between maternal emotionally abusive or emotionally neglectful childhood experiences and subsequent parenting behaviours, beliefs or attitudes; (2) the paper was written in English, and (3) the study was published in a peer reviewed journal. Studies were excluded if they: (1) reported exposure to combined types of abuse only; (2) used a qualitative methodology; (3) were unpublished dissertations; (4) were single-case studies, or (5) were conference abstracts.

Search Strategy

Given the scarcity of studies examining the intergenerational impact of childhood experience of emotional abuse and emotional neglect, we undertook a review which was designed to be as comprehensive as possible. We therefore allowed for variability across studies in a number of ways. Firstly, in terms of the way in which emotionally abusive and neglectful childhood experiences were conceptualised and measured; secondly in terms of the subsequent parenting outcomes measured within each study, and thirdly in terms of variability between participants recruited to studies (including studies examining maternal representations in expectant mothers).

Four electronic databases (Psych Info, EMBASE, Medline and Sociological Abstracts) were searched up to 7 November 2013. The thesaurus function was used to determine subject headings or descriptors that were specific to each database. Keyword searches were carried out using the terms:

“child abuse” or “emotional* abuse*” or “psychological* abuse*” or “mental* abuse*” or “verbal* abuse*” or “child neglect*” or “emotional* neglect*” or “psychological* neglect*” AND “mother child relations*” or “parent child relations*” or “parenting” or “early experience*” or “transgenerational patterns”

An initial review of the titles and/or abstracts of papers identified those that failed to meet inclusion criteria or which met exclusion criteria (see Figure 1). These papers were excluded. Articles that appeared to meet the inclusion criteria were retrieved in full-text for closer inspection and included where these criteria were met. The reference lists of included papers were hand-searched to identify any other relevant studies. Finally, key authors were contacted to ascertain whether any further applicable studies were currently in press. No further papers were identified.

Quality assessment

A quality assessment tool was designed to assess the methodological quality of papers included (see Appendix 1). This was based on guidance published by the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN, 2011) for cohort studies and the check-lists developed by Ertem *et al.* (2000) and Thornberry *et al.* (2012). Thirteen criteria were developed, each of which had six possible outcome ratings. Papers were rated against each criterion on whether it was evaluated to be: 'well covered' (++), 'adequately addressed' (+), 'poorly addressed', 'not addressed', 'not reported' or 'not applicable' (-) (See Appendix 2). Quality assessment was undertaken by the first author. In order to measure inter-rater reliability a sample of included papers was co-rated by a colleague of the first author. One paper was reviewed jointly in the first instance, in order to highlight any aspects of the quality criteria that needed to be clarified. Following this four additional papers were selected at random and second-rated independently. Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960) indicated high agreement between both rater's scores, $K = .870$ (CI: .750, .989), $p < .001$. Both raters resolved discrepancies with discussion. An overall rating of each paper was given, based on whether it met 'all or most criteria' (++),

‘some criteria’ (+) or ‘few or no criteria’ (-).

Retrospective studies were awarded a maximum rating of (+) due to acknowledged weaknesses in this type of design (SIGN, 2011). Of the 12 papers reviewed, all met 'some criteria' and none met 'all or most criteria'. Overall, the papers reviewed were of a relatively low quality.

Results

The search produced a total of 9,387 papers. Following removal of duplicates and examination of the titles or abstracts of the remaining papers, 41 articles were retrieved for full text review. Two further articles were identified from reference lists. Of these, 29 articles were excluded based on inclusion/exclusion criteria (See Appendix 3) resulting in 12 articles retained for review.

Insert Figure 1 here

Information on included studies design, participants, aims, results and overall quality ratings is summarised in Table 1. (Additional information on each study is contained in Appendix 4) A total of 3,758 adult participants (composite mean age 30.19 years) were recruited across the 12 studies. The mean standard deviation of participant age calculated from the eight studies that reported this was 6.22.

In order to facilitate clarity within the following section results are summarised into three main categories of parenting outcomes. The first category explores the impact of mothers' reported emotionally abusive and neglectful childhood experiences on their beliefs about their parenting competence. The second looks at the effect of these early

experiences on aspects of relational functioning. The third reports on the relationship between mothers' own emotional maltreatment histories and their subsequent maladaptive/ abusive behaviours and/or maltreatment potential.

Insert Table 1 here

Competence in the parenting role

Three studies examined the effect of mothers' emotionally abusive and neglectful childhood experiences on subsequent self-perceptions of competence and self-efficacy within the parenting role Caldwell *et al.* (2011) reported that, compared with other forms of childhood maltreatment, maternal emotional abuse was most strongly associated with lower levels of parental self-efficacy. Similarly, maternal history of emotional neglect was also found to be associated with lower levels of parental self-efficacy. Conversely, Zuravin and Fontanella (1999) found no relationship between maternal childhood experience of verbal abuse and perceived parenting competence. Lang *et al.* (2010) also found that maternal experience of childhood emotional abuse did not predict perceived parenting competence. Zuravin and Fontanella (1999) did however find that maternal perceptions of childhood emotional support increased the likelihood of perceived parenting competence.

Impact on relational functioning

Seven studies explored the impact of mothers' emotionally abusive and neglectful childhood experiences on the way in which they related to their children, using measures of parenting stress (Lang *et al.*, 2010; Pereira *et al.*, 2012), prenatal

attachment (Siddiqui *et al.*, 2000), acceptance and psychological control (Zalewski *et al.* 2013), maternal representations of the infant (Malone *et al.*, 2010), perceptions of infant behaviour (Lang *et al.*, 2010), parenting style (Bert *et al.*, 1999), maternal sensitivity (Pereira *et al.*, 2012) and engagement with play/praise (Fujiwara *et al.*, 2011).

Bert *et al.* (2009) found that maternal self-report of emotional abuse in childhood was significantly associated with decreased responsivity and empathy towards their six-month old infants. Lang *et al.* (2010) presented conflicting evidence for the relationship between maternal history of childhood emotional abuse and parent-child interactions and distress in the parental role in a small sample of mothers (n=31). Although the overall regression model (exploring emotional, physical and sexual abuse together) was not found to account for a statistically significant amount of variance, predictor-level statistics highlighted that maternal history of childhood emotional abuse was predictive of more dysfunctional parent-child interactions. Maternal childhood emotional abuse was, however, not predictive of defensive responding or parental distress.

Pereira *et al.* (2012) reported significant relationships between maternal experience of childhood emotional abuse and emotional neglect and increased ratings of parental distress, dysfunctional interaction, perceptions of child difficulty and total stress score. A significant relationship was also found between maternal history of emotional neglect and observer-rating of lower maternal sensitivity during mother-child interactions. However, although maternal history of emotional abuse was also associated with less maternal sensitivity, this relationship was not found to be significant.

Zalewski *et al.* (2013) found that mothers who self-reported childhood

emotional abuse were rated by their children as being significantly lower in acceptance and higher in psychological control. This relationship was independent of maternal depression and other parental risk factors, (i.e. maternal education, maternal income, minority race and single parent status). Maternal history of emotional neglect was also positively related to maternal psychological control; however, this failed to remain significant when maternal depression and other parenting risk factors were controlled for. The relationship between emotional neglect and maternal acceptance was not significant.

Siddiqui *et al.* (2000) reported on a study which found maternal childhood self-reported experience of greater emotional warmth to be predictive of stronger prenatal attachment. Conversely, Malone *et al.* (2010) found that prenatal maternal representations ('balanced' vs. 'non-balanced') of the infant during the third trimester of pregnancy were not differentiated by maternal childhood experience of emotional abuse or emotional neglect.

Fujiwara and colleagues (2011) examined the impact of childhood experience of psychological abuse on subsequent parenting behaviours, specifically the use of praise and play. History of psychological abuse was assessed using a two-item subscale of a self-report measure adapted from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein *et al.*, 1994). Praise and play behaviours were assessed using two survey questions developed on the basis of the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment scale (Caldwell and Bradley, 1984). The authors found that maternal self-report of childhood psychological abuse was not associated with less child-directed play or praise behaviours.

Impact on maladaptive/ abusive parenting behaviours and/or maltreatment potential

Four studies looked at the relationship between mothers' own histories of emotional abuse/ neglect in childhood and self-reported maladaptive/ abusive parenting or maltreatment potential.

Bert *et al.* (2009) found that higher levels of self-reported maternal childhood emotional abuse were associated with an increase in maternal reports of child abuse potential. Similarly, Chung *et al.* (2009) found that mothers exposed to verbal hostility in childhood were more likely to use 'infant spanking' and more likely to value corporal punishment. Verbal hostility and use of 'infant spanking' were, however, identified as being present in response to self-report on two single survey items. Conversely, De Paul and Domenech (2000) found that mothers who self-reported parental emotional withdrawal in childhood did not represent a higher risk for physical abuse than those who did not identify these early experiences.

Haaspasalo and Aaltonen (1999) found that self-reported maternal childhood psychological abuse predicted maternal punitiveness but not maternal physical or psychological child-directed abuse.

Discussion

Despite awareness of the impact of childhood experience of emotional abuse and emotional neglect on subsequent intra- and interpersonal functioning, there have been few studies undertaken to date which examine the impact of these experiences on the subsequent generation parent-child relationship. This systematic review is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to attempt a review of such studies.

Summary of evidence on the impact of emotionally abusive and neglectful experiences on parenting outcomes

Papers included in this review described mixed evidence for a relationship between mothers' reported histories of emotionally abusive/neglectful experiences and parenting self-efficacy and competence (Caldwell *et al.*, 2011; Zuravin and Fontanella, 1999; Lang *et al.*, 2010). Tentative associations were found between mothers' childhood experiences and subsequent dysfunctional parent-child interactions (Lang *et al.*, 2010; Pereira *et al.*, 2012); lower empathy (Bert *et al.*, 2009); lower acceptance (Zalewski *et al.*, 2013); greater psychological control (Zalewski *et al.*, 2013); increased child maltreatment potential (Bert *et al.*, 2009); use of infant spanking (Chung *et al.*, 2009) and attitudes toward punishment (Bert *et al.*, 2009; Chung *et al.*, 2009) and punitiveness (Haapasalo and Aaltonen, 1999). Maternal perceptions of greater childhood experience of emotional warmth were reported to be related to greater pre-natal attachment (Siddiqui *et al.*, 2000), suggesting that the emotional dimensions of the parent-child relationship may have a transgenerational impact on the formation of key attachment relationships between focal generation parents and their own children.

On this note, it is worthwhile noting the deficit focus of the reviewed papers, with few highlighting explicitly the point that, whilst there may be detrimental parenting impacts of a childhood history of emotional abuse, the findings here are consistent with extant research which suggests that the majority of mothers who have experienced adverse childhood experiences appear *not* to go on to maltreat their own children ((e.g. Pears and Capaldi, 2001). The study by Chung *et al.* (2009) for example reported that whilst 17% of mothers exposed to a history of verbal hostility in their own childhood

reported using infant spanking (compared with 12% of mothers not exposed to verbal hostility) the implication is that over 80% of these mothers did not. This finding highlights another important issue, namely that whilst a maltreatment history may elevate the risk for subsequent maltreatment, it alone does not account for all maltreatment instances and/or potential.

Limitations of Papers Reviewed

There were a range of methodological limitations within the included papers that reduce our ability to draw firm conclusions from the literature reviewed. These included issues such as small sample sizes, uncertainty and variability in how maltreatment experiences were defined and measured, a lack of established validity and/or reliability of the measures used and a reliance on cross-sectional, retrospective designs and self-report data. There was also a failure to take into account important confounding variables, which limits our ability to understand the way in which they may impact on, or interact with, the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables. Whilst we excluded papers that did not provide separate data for emotional abuse/neglect subgroups, this did not control for the fact that many participants within these groups may have been exposed to other forms of maltreatment. Although a reality of clinical samples, this must be noted as a weakness. A further limitation is that the majority of studies reviewed here included analyses of emotional abuse and emotional neglect as secondary outcome data rather than as the primary research aim.

Making links with theory

This review highlights a range of adverse outcomes that may be associated with a

maternal history of emotionally abusive and neglectful experiences in childhood. Attachment theory, which describes the development of internal working models through interpersonal interactions with primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1969), provides a meaningful framework within which these findings can be understood. This framework suggests that children who have learned to fear relational experiences, or who have struggled to have their needs met, may develop internal working models of others as abusive, hostile or neglectful. Their desire to have their needs met can conflict with the fear that these interactions invoke, leading to inconsistent approach and avoidance behaviours (Main and Hesse, 1990). These strategies, which may have been adaptive in childhood, may continue to be utilised out-with conscious awareness in adulthood, including within subsequent parent-child relationships. Mistrust and suspiciousness of others' actions and conflicting desires to be both self-sufficient and to keep others close, are likely to impact on the parent-child relationship, particularly during times of conflict when behaviour may be most strongly guided by these early models of self and others.

The relationship between early experiences of emotional abuse and neglect and the impact on parenting outcomes highlighted appears to be particularly evident in terms of the impact on relational functioning. This may be a consequence of the impact of these maltreatment experiences on the attachment relationship and the development of early maladaptive schemas, through which interpersonal situations are filtered (Young, 1994). Mixed evidence in relation to the impact on subsequent maladaptive parenting behaviours (e.g. punishment) may therefore be explained in the context of the specific nature of these early maltreatment experiences and the possible development of a qualitatively different set of maladaptive coping responses than may be observed in relation to physical abuse.

Clinical Implications

For practitioners, these results highlight the relevance of considering maternal childhood experiences when trying to make sense of children's difficulties and when promoting and intervening in their health and wellbeing and parenting. It would seem pragmatic for those working with mothers who report a history of emotional maltreatment or neglect to consider whether assessment of the mother's parenting of her own children is warranted. At a minimum, this should draw on client history, independent report (e.g. from school staff) and multi-informant observational data.

Although we found mixed evidence for a relationship between maternal experience of emotionally abusive or neglectful behaviours in childhood and mothers' subsequent pre-natal representations and attachment to their infant, it is important that research continues to explore this area. Identification of pre-natal maternal perceptions of her unborn child could facilitate early intervention in cases where attachment difficulties are indicated, or where maternal representations are distorted or disengaged. Facilitating a joint understanding of the impact of early maltreatment experiences on the subsequent emotional dimensions of the parent-child relationship is increasingly recognised as a useful tool encourage and strengthen the parent-child relationship (Dozier and Bick, 2007). Opportunities for parents to reflect on their own childhood experiences and the ways in which these may impact on their relationships with their own children may provide opportunities for early intervention and help de-stigmatise later help-seeking behaviours. This is also important in order to help prevent the intergenerational transmission of abuse (McCulloch *et al.* 2014).

Directions for future research

Future research should seek to address the limitations of the extant literature as highlighted above. A further issue is the apparent dearth of studies using a UK sample, an issue our team has attempted to address (Hughes et al. 2015). Such research would help clarify whether the parenting issues identified in this review are similar within a British context and could help shape prevention efforts in the intergenerational transmission of abuse/neglect. Exploration of factors that might mediate the associations between parents' own emotional maltreatment and detrimental parenting outcomes could further increase our understanding of the route through which these experiences have their impact. Related to this, an increased understanding of the potential differential impact of the child's age, the severity and frequency of abusive experiences and the child's relationship to the perpetrator could facilitate more clarity in terms of the professional response needed. A consideration of protective factors is also of importance in guiding our knowledge in this area. Future research should also consider the role of the father, both in terms of the possible protective impact of a co-parenting non-abused/neglected father on child outcomes and also the impact of paternal childhood experiences of emotional abuse and neglect on their own subsequent parenting practices. Prospective designs could help us understand whether impacts on parenting outcomes change, either through intervention or simply over time. More work is needed to identify helpful interventions for families affected by the issues outlined. As Glaser (2002) helpfully pointed out, there are many contexts in which emotional maltreatment may occur (e.g. poor parental mental health, domestic abuse, substance abuse) and multiple ways in which it can be observed (e.g. active hostility and denigration versus passive non-engagement and indifference). These factors highlight

the need for interventions that address specifically the issues of concern and which are tailored individually to families. Finally, as already noted, all of the papers included in this review adopted a deficit model for considering the effects of emotional maltreatment, with few highlighting explicitly that while parental experience of emotional maltreatment in childhood may confer risk for the intergenerational transmission of child abuse, this only holds for a small minority. With this in mind, future research should approach this issue from a resilience perspective in order to help identify what factors reduce or minimise this risk across generations.

Limitations

Whilst a sample of included studies was rated jointly for quality, only the first author was involved in the original selection of, and data extraction from, these studies. This is a potential source of bias that could have been reduced by involving more than one person in this process. We accept that our search terms lacked specificity. A future review in this area should aim for more precision in terms of how the outcomes of interest are searched for. We recognise that our decision to include studies where there was heterogeneity in how abusive and neglectful experiences were defined and measured places limitations on our ability to synthesise outcomes. However, we believed that a broad and comprehensive review was important in order to gather together all available evidence, with a view to outlining important methodological issues and highlighting the need for further research. A further limitation was our decision to include studies where experiences of emotional abuse and/or emotional neglect were not the primary focus (i.e. where a simple exploration of emotional abuse was carried out in the context of a multi-type maltreatment design). This weakens the

strength of conclusions drawn and the outcomes of each study should be weighed up in relation to its quality assessment.

Conclusions

Tentative evidence is presented for a relationship between maternal experiences of emotional abuse and neglect in childhood and a negative impact on aspects of their subsequent parenting. Evidence regarding the impact on parenting competence is mixed, with few papers exploring this to date. Findings suggest that emotionally abusive and neglectful experiences in childhood may impact not only at the individual level through impairments in intra- and interpersonal functioning, but also on the wider family environment through resultant parenting difficulties. This highlights the importance of building on our knowledge of risk and protective factors in relation to emotional abuse/neglect so that interventions can be appropriately developed and tailored to meet the needs of parents and children.

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